PEN 言語教育サービス
Reports for English Education

PLES Report No.41

Teaching Countable, Uncountable, Plural Nouns

SHIGENORI TANAKA

PEN Language Education Serivices

Framing the Issue

The demand of learning the article system in English may differ according to the learner's language background; some (Japanese or Chinese speakers) find it formi-dable, and others (German or Norwegian speakers) find it relatively easy (Thomas, 1989). Many learners of English, however, have difficulty in using English articles properly in context, because each language has its own set of rules and the two sets rarely match perfectly.

Traditionally, a demarcation has been made between "countable nouns" and "uncountable nouns" (Quirk, Greenbaum, Leech, & Svartvick, 1972). Learners are often taught that there is an a priori distinction between countable and uncount-able nouns, and that countable nouns can take either the indefinite article "a" or the plural "–s," while uncountable nouns are expressed with the zero article (Ø). However, this view is not altogether correct. The lemma (or dictionary form) *apple*, for example, is generally considered "a countable noun," and expressed in the noun form of "an apple (a single apple)" or "apples (plural apples)." If some-one says, however, "Put more apple in the salad," the form "apple" refers to a uncountable entity. Thus, the lemma *apple* can be either "an apple" or "apple," and the countable / uncountable distinction depends on which noun form is selected. It is a difficult task for L2 learners to decide a priori which noun is countable. For them, *feeling* sounds like an uncountable noun, and yet, they encounter not only "feeling," but also "a feeling" and "feelings." Then the ques-tion is: How do we help learners to use countable, uncountable, and plural nouns properly?

The TESOL Encyclopedia of English Language Teaching, First Edition.
Edited by John I. Liontas (Project Editor: Margo DelliCarpini).
© 2018 John Wiley & Sons, Inc. Published 2018 by John Wiley & Sons, Inc.
DOI: 10.1002/9781118784235.eelt0780

Copyright © 2019 PEN言語教育サービス. All Rights Reserved.

Making the Case

It is not appropriate to say that one adds or deletes the indefinite article "a /an" to a particular noun, because "an apple" and "apple" are two different noun forms to refer to different entities. The countable/uncountable distinction applies *not to words*, *but to their referents*, and the referent of a noun is not simply "something out there." It is in the speaker's mind; a referent is a mental representation. In this regard, Langacker (1990) describes his cognitive stance about meaning as follows:

> Meaning is therefore sought *in the realm of cognitive processing*. It does not reside in objective reality, nor is the problem of semantic description revealingly formulated in terms of truth conditions. Even expressions describing an objective situation may differ in meaning *depending on how the situation is construed.*" (p. 61) (emphasis added)

This description applies to the semantics of English articles as well. That is, the countable/uncountable distinction is based on the way a noun is used and how the referent is "construed." If you spot something on your friend's tie, you would say, "Hey, you've got some egg on your tie," selecting the uncountable form of "egg." "Countability," which depends on how a thing looks like, is an important construct here. For example, the lemmas *sand* and *pebble* are commonly expressed as "sand" and "pebbles," respectively. We do not normally count grains of sand, and yet pebbles are more identifiable as separate entities.

Langacker (1990) defines "count(able) noun" as referring to a bounded region in some domain. Heterogeneity is crucial to bounding. Pebbles are of different size and color, and hence, heterogeneous, while sand is perceived of as a homogeneous mass. When one sees a spot which is red, one will say, "I see a red spot." However, if red fills the visual field, the situation would be described as "I see (nothing but) red" because one cannot see a bounded spot in the domain.

According to the countability-based principle of choosing a noun form, "leaves" are countable because the referent is more easily distinguishable than that of "grass." This is basically a perception-based principle. However, there are also a great many nouns whose referents are not physically perceivable at all. The referents of abstract nouns (e.g., "feeling," "trouble," and "love") are characterized by the lack of physical presence in space, and yet, one can say "a feeling of insecurity" and "credit card troubles."

Bloom (1996) introduces another principle, the principle of cognitive individuation, which assumes that the selective use of a count noun and a mass noun depends on whether a person interprets the referent as an individual entity or as a non-individuated entity. In a sense, countability depends on ease of individuation: the more individuable, the more countable. However, "a count noun," expressed in the form of "a+noun," or "noun+-s," does not always refer to a countable entity. For example, when we say, "She had a feeling of insecurity," we are not interested in counting the number of "feelings of security" the person had.

 Copyright © 2019 PEN言語教育サービス. All Rights Reserved.

Individuation is considered a broader concept than countability because one can individuate an entity not only as a bounded thing, but also as a kind, a unit, or an action. The individuation-based principle of choosing a noun form will be expressed as follows:

1. If the noun form "a + noun" is used, one can assume that the referent entity is individuated as a bounded thing, a kind, a unit, or an action.
2. If the entity is considered countable, or the entity is conceptualized as something consisting of plural elements, then the plural form applies.
3. If the noun form "Ø + noun" is used, individuation is disregarded and the referent entity is non-individuated as a material (e.g., "gold," "water"), an abstract concept (e.g., "love," "dignity"), or a collective concept (e.g., "equipment," "furniture").

The choice of a noun form depends on the speaker's perception and conceptualization of an entity in question. Simply put, the speaker selects the "a + noun" form when principle (1) operates. When individuating an entity, the speaker may be concerned with the entity as (a) a bounded thing (e.g., an apple), (b) a kind / "an instance of" (e.g., a feeling of insecurity), (c) a unit / "a measure of" (e.g., a coffee), (d) an action (e.g., a walk). If the speaker considers the entity in question countable, then the plural noun form becomes possible. The referent of "an apple" is commonly considered the target of counting (e.g., "5 apples"). The noun form "a coffee" in "I want a coffee" would be interpreted as a kind (a kind of coffee) or as a unit (a cup of coffee), either of which is open to the plural form (e.g., "3 coffees"). Even an action can be taken out as an experience. Thus, we can say, "take a walk, "make a decision," and "take a look." But "a walk," "a decision," or "a look" is not usually expressed in the plural form.

As mentioned earlier, one usually uses the noun form "sand" to refer to a massed aggregate. However, one can use "sands" when referring to varieties of substance (Reid, 1991, p. 111), as in "Several rare sands have been discovered in that mountain." The plural "sands" is motivated by the individuation-based principle—one can individuate something as varieties (or kinds) of substance as in "two fruits (two kinds of fruit).

The principle of individuation works even in the case of "trouble vs. troubles," and "Hemingway vs. an angry Hemingway." The noun form "trouble" in "He had trouble walking" is uncountable, but we have the plural form "troubles" as in "We have credit card troubles," where "troubles" are conceptualized as individuated instances of trouble. The expression "an angry Hemingway" is possible, not because we are interested in counting the number of an angry Hemingway, but because one can assume different kinds of Ernest Hemingway (e.g., a happy Hemingway, a sad-looking Hemingway). In the case of nouns like "clothes" and "bowels," the plural form is motivated not because they are countable entities, but because "clothes" and "bowels" are conceptualized as something consisting of plural elements. "Clothes" and "bowels" refer to discrete entities in bulk, and hence, we do not usually count.

Copyright © 2019 PEN言語教育サービス. All Rights Reserved.

Thus, the individuation-based principle, subsuming the principle of countablity, is more generalizable and explanatory. For the purpose of L2 pedagogy, however, we may use both principles, in that (a) countability-based exercises will help L2 learners understand that the use of noun forms depends on how things (referents) look like, and (b) on the basis of such exercises in (a), learners can move to individuation-based exercises more smoothly.

Pedagogical Implications

Some entities are conventionally referred to with certain noun forms in English, and it has been a pedagogical practice to show a list of nouns in their conventional forms, as in the following:

The "Ø+noun" form: air, salt, gold; cloth, money, paper; chicken, pork, salmon, tuna; anger, bravery, justice, honesty; baseball, basketball, football; surgery, evidence; equipment, kitchenware, furniture; sheep, deer, and so forth.
The plural noun form: briefs, clippers, glasses, goggles, jeans; billiards, cards, darts, dominoes; belongings, savings, valuables; acknowledgments, apologies, compliments, and so forth.

These lists are pedagogically useful, and yet, the foregoing discussion suggests that L2 learners can be equipped with a more generalizable theory. There are two pedagogical points to emphasize: (a) the countable/uncountable distinction does not apply to the words but rather to their referents that are being talked about; (b) the selective use of countable, uncountable, and plural nouns depends on how the speaker perceives or conceptualizes the referent in question. More specifically, teaching practice should focus on how a person chooses a noun form to refer to an intended object. Three pedagogical suggestions are made here: (a) perception-based exercises, (b) individuation-based exercises, and (c) grammar-in-text exercises.

First, perception-based exercises will be used to heighten the learner's sensitivity to countability. For example, a set of pictures such as the following will be presented depicting the referents of nouns and students are asked to choose the right noun form to describe each picture.

[egg]

[eggs]

[sand]

[pebbles]

[a chicken]

[chicken]

You crack an egg and beat it, and yet, once you beat it until it is light and frothy, it will be called "beaten egg" or "egg," not "a beaten egg." If you spot something yellow on someone's tie after having breakfast, you would say, "You have egg on

Copyright © 2019 PEN言語教育サービス. All Rights Reserved.

your tie." The expression "You have an egg (or eggs) on your tie" sounds strange. Sand is seen as a mass (granular material), while pebbles or stones are more distinguishable. The noun form "a chicken" refers to a whole chicken while "chicken" refers to its meat. Depending on what referent you have in your mind, it could be "a chicken" or "chicken."

Second, individuation-based exercises like the one shown below would help students understand that the use of "a + noun" motivates the cognitive process of individuating an entity as a bounded thing, a kind, and a unit.

(1) There was silence during the meeting. vs. There was a silence during the meeting.
(2) She lost feeling in the right arm. vs. She has a feeling that the man is a nice teacher.
(3) Don't waste paper. vs. She is writing a paper on biomass energy.

The teacher would encourage students to discuss the semantic effect of using the "a + noun" form here. "A silence" in (1) is motivated by unit-based individuation: "a silence" implies a temporal unit (i.e., duration) having the starting point and the end point. The noun form of "a feeling" is a marker of individuation: it refers to a kind of (or instance of) feeling, which is specified by a that-clause. In (3), "paper" refers to an unbounded material, while "a paper" refers to something individuated and bounded (e.g., an academic paper or a newspaper).

There are cases in which a noun expressed in "a + noun" refers to a bounded thing, while the counterpart "Ø + noun" form refers to an unbounded entity, which is semantically related to the "a + noun" form.

(4) The city built a school on the hill. vs. She started school this April.
(5) That's a fine building. vs. There is plenty of building going on.
(6) I bought a piano for my daughter. vs. My daughter studies piano.

In (4), "a school" is a countable noun referring to a bounded thing (i.e., a school building), whereas "school" is semantically related to "a school," but its referent is no longer a bounded thing, but an unbounded entity (i.e., an institution designed for the teaching of students). The same goes for the contrast between "a fine building" and "building" in (5) or "a piano" and "piano" in (6). The teacher encourages students to discuss the difference between "a + noun" and "Ø + noun" with respect to the referent each denotes, and explains that the "a + noun" form produces some kind of individuation effect, while the "Ø + noun" form "effaces" the individuation effect.

Finally, to put grammar in real language use, authentic materials (e.g., films, novels, and speeches) should be used to demonstrate how different noun forms contribute to the textual meaning. We may call this "grammar-in-text exercises." For example, the concept of "love" is abstract, and the uncountable form is generally preferred. However, the countable form can be used as in the following text:

Copyright © 2019 PEN言語教育サービス. All Rights Reserved.

> A story about a time, a story about a place, a story about the people. But above all things, a story about *love*. *A love* that will live forever. (Baz Luhrmann's film, *Moulin Rouge!*, 2001)

Here, "love" in "a story about love" is used as a generic sense, and the following "a love" is modified by the relative clause, thus suggesting "a kind of love." L2 learners can appreciate the use of noun forms in text, and, as a result, deepen their understanding of the text itself. Likewise, the teacher would draw students' attention to "a Kaynes vs. Kaynes" in the following text:

> What kind of writer or intellectual makes that kind of dough – *a Keynes*? OK. *Keynes*, a world figure. A genius in economics" (Saul Bellow, *Humboldt's Gift*, p. 2)

The proper noun "Keynes" refers to John Maynard Keynes, a British economist. The noun form "A Keynes" refers to a person who is so similar to the original Keynes that he can be a member of the category "Keynes." Thus, we have two Keynes in the same category (the original person and a person like the original), which makes it possible to individuate one.

Just knowing that the use of a noun form depends on the speaker's perception and conceptualization will ease the psychological burden learners have when using English articles.

SEE ALSO: Authentic Materials; Using Dialogues, Role Plays, Songs, and Poetry in Teaching Speaking

References

Bellow, S. (2007). *Humboldt's gift (Penguin Classics)*. London, England: Penguin Books.

Bloom, P. (1996). Intention, history, and artifact concepts. *Cognition*, *60*(1), 1–29.

Langacker, R. (1990). *Concept, image, and symbol: The cognitive basis of grammar*. Berlin, Germany: Mouton de Gruyter.

Quirk, R., Greenbaum, S., Leech G., & Svartvik, J. (1972). *A grammar of contemporary English*. London, England: Longman.

Reid, W. (1991). *Verb and noun number in English: A functional explanation*. London, England: Longman.

Thomas, M. (1989). The acquisition of English articles by first- and second-language learners. *Applied Psycholinguistics*, *10*, 335–55.

Suggested Readings

Abbott, B. (2006). Definite and indefinite. In E. Brown, R. Asher, & J. Simpson (Eds.), *Encyclopedia of language & linguistics* (2nd ed., pp. 392–99). Boston, MA: Elsevier.

Allan, K. (1980). Nouns and countability. *Language*, *56*, 541–67.

Asher, N. (1993). *Reference to abstract objects in discourse*. Dordrecht, Netherlands: Kluwer.

 Copyright © 2019 PEN言語教育サービス. All Rights Reserved.

Hawkins, J. (1978). *Definiteness and indefiniteness: a study in reference and grammaticality prediction*. London, England: Croom Helm.

Wierzbicka, A. (1988). *The semantics of grammar* (pp. 499–560). Amsterdam, Netherlands: John Benjamins.

Copyright © 2019 PEN言語教育サービス. All Rights Reserved.